

Teaching Students to Overcome Test Anxiety

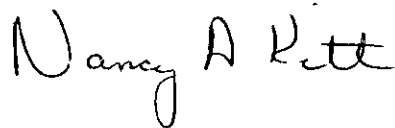
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nancy A. Kitt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'N' and a distinct 'K'.

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Abstract

The number of students suffering from test anxiety grows each and every day. Many individuals are not aware of the problems associated with test anxiety. This thesis gives an explanation of what test anxiety is; what causes it; how it effects students, parents, and teachers; and what can be done to overcome test anxiety. Information provided within the thesis is applicable to any student, no matter how young or old.

Acknowledgements

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- My parents, Ron and Janice, have (and will always be) a great source of strength and support as I spent many hours working through this project. Thank you for everything you have done in my life!
- The most special thank you goes to all of the students for whom this project is written. My years at the University Learning Center showed me that test anxiety is real and that many good, hard-working students suffered from the fear of taking an examination. I hope that I was able to effect your lives the same way you have affected mine.

Teaching Students to Overcome Test Anxiety

What happens as you walk into a classroom on the day of an examination? Do your palms become clammy and start to sweat? Are you prone to headaches on test day? Does the thought of not remembering anything that was studied cross your mind before the test is passed out? Have you ever looked at the exam and forgotten everything relating to the content of the test? Does your mind ever wander off while taking a test as you begin thinking of other things? All of these are signs of test anxiety that are experienced to some degree by everyone. Some individuals are able to overcome the feelings of test anxiety while in a testing situation, while others are consumed by the overwhelming fear of the test.

What is Test Anxiety?

“Test anxiety is an uneasiness or apprehension experienced before, during, or after an examination because of concern, worry, or fear” (Test Anxiety, 5 August 2002). There are varying degrees of test anxiety, most of which are good. Test anxiety makes one study for a big test before the test day arrives. Usually, test anxiety kicks in during a testing situation, allowing the test taker to

become more alert and perform better on an exam. However, test anxiety can be detrimental to a test taker who becomes completely consumed by the fears associated with taking a test. It is estimated that 20% of college students suffer from test anxiety that is so severe that their grades fall and they become less satisfied with life in general.

The University of Texas Learning Center encourages its students to ask themselves the following questions. If they answer yes to one or more of these questions, then it is safe to assume that the student suffers from some degree of test anxiety. The questions asked are:

1. *Are you aware of being really nervous on a test, maybe so nervous that you don't do your best and you lose points, even though you know you've studied well and are prepared?*
2. *Does your stomach ever get tight or upset before or during a test? Hands cold and sweaty? Headaches? Do you have trouble sleeping the night before a test?*
3. *Do you ever find your mind racing, or dull or "muddy," so that you can't think clearly, while taking a test?*
4. *Do you ever forget, during a test, material you studied and learned, maybe only to remember it again later after the test is over?*
5. *Do you "overanalyze" questions, see too many possibilities, choose the complex answer and overlook—and miss—the simpler correct one?*
6. *Do you make many careless errors on a test?*

Test anxiety can manifest itself through many different physical and emotional symptoms. Some physical symptoms include headaches, nausea, faintness, and feeling too hot or too cold. Feeling angry, helpless, or wanting to cry or laugh too much are a few of the emotional manifestations of test anxiety. "The major problem of test anxiety is usually its effect on thinking ability; it can cause you to blank out or have racing thoughts that are difficult to control" (Managing Test Anxiety, November 2002). Luckily for most students, they are

able to control these feelings of worry and anxiety during an exam and bring it down to a manageable level.

Causes for Test Anxiety

Testing is becoming more prevalent in society every day. Elementary students are expected to pass both instructor-made and standardized tests to see whether or not they can be promoted to the next level. High school students are expected to perform on instructor-made tests, standardized tests, the SAT's, the ACT's, and in some states a GQE (Graduation Qualifying Exam). The tests high school students must pass are to see not only if they can go on to the next grade level, but also determine if they are able to graduate from high school with a diploma. The SAT or ACT tests are required for all college bound high school seniors. Not only does it matter whether or not they take the test, but how well they perform on these tests may determine where they will be accepted into college. This could potentially affect the rest of their lives if a college accepts students based solely on test scores. At the collegiate level, examinations are used in all subject areas to see if a student knows the information and is able to apply newly acquired skills to the real world. Many college students must also pass licensing examinations to determine if they are going to be certified in the field that they have studied for the past four years. Testing even goes beyond the college campus. Many professions require on-going testing to ensure that an employee is competent in the content of a particular field. With all of these tests

to be successfully completed, it is only to be expected that an individual often will experience high levels of test anxiety.

There is not one specific cause for test anxiety. The prevalence and importance of testing in today's society has led to a higher level of test anxiety for many individuals. Research shows that test anxiety is more prevalent in individuals who tend to worry or feel anxious about most things in life. Those who have a severe fear of failure or tend to be "perfectionists" usually suffer from higher levels of test anxiety than the majority of students. Another group of students who report feeling higher levels of test anxiety are those who believe they are being judged in some way by the examination. It is important for these students to realize that a test can be thought of as a conversation between the test taker and the examiner, not necessarily as a judgment tool. The student is merely expected to tell the examiner what he knows through the test. Therefore, a test can be thought of as a written dialogue between instructor and student. Finally, test anxiety can be caused by the thought that if the student fails a test, he will let down his parents or suffer some consequence at home. This is typically what causes elementary students to begin experiencing test anxiety.

Implications for Students

All of the research located on this topic indicates the importance of studying early for any examination to reduce test anxiety. Studying for the examination also includes determining what type of test you will be taking and then studying properly for that specific type. Studying for a test just before taking

it, also known as cramming, does not allow for mentally processing the information thoroughly. Therefore when a student tries to cram for an exam, he does not really learn the information; but instead tries to store large amounts of information in short-term memory. One's short-term memory is not generally reliable in a stressful situation. Information cannot be recalled as easily as when it has been learned and is now in one's long-term memory.

It is important that students realize test anxiety is not necessarily bad. Anxiety allows for a student to be at his peak alertness during a test. However, for students who cannot overcome the feelings of anxiety that occur just before the exam, test anxiety becomes a major problem. Once test anxiety takes control, one must choose between "fighting" the fear, and "taking flight" from the fear. This is known as the fight or flight response. Whenever faced with a challenge or a fear, adrenaline typically comes into play and the choice to fight or take flight is made unconsciously. As a test taker, one typically has the option to choose between these two responses. A test is not an immediate danger, and one will not be physically harmed by the exam. Therefore if one decides to fight the fear of the exam, he will slowly gain the confidence needed to succeed in taking tests. But if one decides to take flight from his testing fears, the anxiety then begins to take control and the student is unable to think clearly. Typically this student is less successful in a testing situation.

One of the best ways for a student to overcome the fear of testing is to use positive self-talk before, during, and after an examination. Self-talk is the mental conversation one has with oneself. An individual can either have positive

self-talk or negative self-talk. During positive self-talk, messages of confidence and capability are sent to oneself. Likewise, during negative self-talk messages of inability and worthlessness are conveyed. A student who suffers from test anxiety unconsciously begins to send himself negative messages through self-talk. However, through careful observation of these messages, he can then become aware of the negative self-talk and slowly begin to make it more positive in nature. Oftentimes through simply turning the negative messages into positive ones, an individual is able to overcome most of his test anxiety. Remember that some test anxiety is needed for peak performance on an examination; therefore it will never go away completely nor does an individual want it to. Small amounts of test anxiety are what drive someone to study for an examination before the day of the test.

Implications for Parents

Parents need to know that many students say that test anxiety begins at home. Students report feeling too much pressure to be an A student when their personal best might be slightly lower. Parents often pressure their students to work hard and do their best in all aspects of life. While it is noble to try and encourage children to work hard and put forth the effort needed to succeed in school, it is pertinent that parents set reasonable expectations for their children. The public does not expect the President of the United States to be able to go and score a winning touchdown at the Super Bowl. Likewise, parents need to realize that children have personal strengths and weaknesses too.

One way parents can help reduce test anxiety within a student is for that student to be reassured that no matter what grade is earned, he is still going to be loved and accepted at home. Many students are afraid that if they do not receive the best grade in the class that their parents are not going to view them as being a good student or person. While this may seem unreasonable to a parent or other adult, the fear of not being loved due to the results of a test is very real for many students. If a child knows that the only thing expected out of him is his personal best for that day, then he is better able to relax and focus on the content of the exam. A test-taker that believes that his parents only love him because of a test score is more likely to begin worrying about his parents loving him during a test. This worrying leads to the student becoming off-task and more uptight during the test, and then often leads directly into lower test scores.

So what can a parent do to help a child overcome some of these test-taking fears? First of all, parents can encourage their children to do their personal best. Parents can also make sure that their child knows he is loved at home and valued as an individual no matter what happens on an exam. Parents can help their child study the content for an exam. After the content has been studied, parents can then discuss the different ways to approach a test using some of the test taking skills listed later. Once all of this has been done, parents can help find a way to make their child relax directly before an exam. Finally, parents need to stress the importance of a good night's sleep immediately before an exam. It is a well-known fact when we are tired we do not perform at our personal best level.

Implications for Instructors

Research on test anxiety shows that it is extremely important for instructors to inform the students of what will be contained on an exam prior to its being administered. Study guides are one way of giving the students prior knowledge of what they are expected to know. It is best for the study guides to be given to the students at least three to four school days before the testing date. This allows for the students to look over the study guide and get any help needed prior to the day of the exam. Students should also be told what the format of the test is going to be (i.e. multiple choice, open-ended, essay, true/false, etc.). This information allows students to study in a format that best matches the test. Also, instructors need to make sure the students know exactly how the test can effect their grades. For example, if a test is going to be worth fifty-percent of the student's grade, a student with test anxiety will have the ability to digest the weight of the test score before approaching the exam. Finally, it is helpful for instructors to stress to the students that one test does not determine the students' final grade nor his self-worth within the classroom.

It is a known fact that instructors are responsible for setting the tone within a classroom. While this happens every day, instructors need to be especially cognizant of the classroom tone on testing days. If the classroom has an unfriendly tone, the students will pick up on it and will be more likely to suffer from test anxiety. Instructors who appear relaxed and at ease about the test and the students' ability to pass it are more likely to help the students suffering from

anxiety relax and concentrate on the task at hand. Some instructors choose to use humor just before passing out a test in order to calm the students' nerves. Other instructors pass out candy or "magic fairy dust" to help break the tension of test-day. Another option is to insert comics into the test for the students to discover as they work their way through the exam. While some of these techniques may seem elementary, they are effective at any grade level.

Strategies for Overcoming Test Anxiety

Overcoming test anxiety is a long process. By no means can an individual expect to feel completely calm while taking a test overnight if he has experienced test anxiety for many years. Learning how to overcome anxiety requires relentless effort on the part of the test taker. However there is no feeling quite like the one of being able to finally show knowledge that has been suppressed by the fear of taking tests.

The research that has been done on test anxiety shows that one of the most effective ways of overcoming test anxiety is through the process of desensitization. Desensitization is the process by which the conditioned response of being frightened by testing situations is slowly changed so fear is no longer associated with tests. This process takes a long time to complete and the test-anxious individual has the assistance of a trained counselor. Desensitization is only used for the most extreme cases of test anxiety due to the amount of time and resources required for this process.

“Test-anxious students tend to have poor study habits and inadequate test-taking skills. Therefore, even when a treatment is successful in reducing test anxiety, lowering anxiety may have little impact on the performance of students with poor study habits. However, reducing test anxiety does facilitate improved academic performance for students with adequate study skills” (Spielberger 212). Research shows that the best way to prevent test anxiety is to study and be familiar with the test content. Without properly preparing for the test, one cannot expect to do well on an examination. There is no one right way to study for a test, but studying should be conducted in a manner that is aligned with the test format. For example, if one knows the test is going to consist of an essay question, it does not make sense to practice answering multiple choice questions in order to prepare. For many, studying for a test and being comfortable with its format will ease most of the anxiety felt in the examination room. However, if knowing the testing material does not help ease test anxiety, using a different test-taking strategy might be the solution for relaxing during an examination.

Joe Landsberger suggests studying for an examination using the “M.U.R.D.E.R.” Study System. This process involves six steps in the study process. These steps are as follows:

- **Mood:**
Set a positive *mood* for yourself to study in.
Select the appropriate time, environment, and attitude
- **Understand:**
Mark any information *you don't understand* in a particular unit
Keep a focus on one unit or a manageable group of exercises
- **Recall:**
After studying the unit, stop and put what you have learned *into your own words*
- **Digest:**

Go back to what you did not understand and **reconsider the information**

Contact external expert sources (e.g., other books or an instructor) if you still cannot understand it

- **Expand:**

In this step, ask **three kinds of questions** concerning the studied material:

1. If I could speak to the author, what questions would I ask or what criticism would I offer?
2. How could I apply this material to what I am interested in?
3. How could I make this information interesting and understandable to other students?

- **Review:**

Go over the material you've covered

Review what strategies helped you understand and/or retain information in the past and apply these to your current studies.

(<http://www.iss.stthomas.edu/studyguides/murder.htm>)

Below, several test-taking strategies are listed. One may need to try several different strategies to see which one works best for that individual. If one is still struggling to find the best strategy from the list below, combining two or more strategies into one might make the test-taker feel the most comfortable during a testing situation.

Before the Exam

- Use self-testing while reviewing whenever possible.
- Maintaining a healthy lifestyle before testing will help you to feel more at ease during an exam. A healthy lifestyle includes "getting enough sleep, good nutrition, exercise, some personal 'down' time, and a reasonable amount of social interaction" (Managing Test Anxiety, November 2002).
- If available, take a practice test the day before, simulating testing conditions as much as possible.

- During review time, recite the material in your own words to ensure mastery and accurate understanding.
- Never forget to encourage yourself while studying.
- Make study aids such as flashcards, outlines, summaries, etc. These tools may take more time, but help to condense course material.
- Study groups can be helpful to combine study resources and receive encouragement at the same time. Be cautious that study groups do not turn into a time to socialize.
- Find out what types of questions are going to be contained in the test. Each type of test requires a different type of studying.
- "If an exam requires specific memorized materials, a tape of just the [necessary] information played just as you fall asleep can enhance memory" (Test Preparation).
- Play classical music in the background while studying for an examination. This has the ability to help improve spatial relations and mathematical ability.
- Take a shower prior to the exam. The warm water tends to relax some people, while cold water stimulates others.
- When possible, it is best to be on time for an examination. Arriving early for the test is even better than just being on time.
- Wear a watch to the test so that time can be closely monitored to ensure the test is completed in the allotted time.
- Directly before the exam is handed out, do not attempt to study notes or the textbook.

- It is best not to discuss the upcoming test with the instructor or other students in the classroom. Questions regarding the test format, supplies needed, or details of the content should have been covered while studying.
- Spend time before the test is handed out mentally reviewing possible test questions and their answers.
- Be sure to think positively prior to the exam.
- Use “thought stopping” when you find that you are sending negative messages to yourself or comparing your abilities to your classmates.
- Make sure to choose a location within the classroom that will have the fewest number of distracters during the exam.
- Breathe slowly while the exams are being handed out so to remain calm.

During the Exam

- Listen carefully to any last minute instructions given by the instructor.
- When you get the examination, read the instructions carefully. Do not hesitate to ask the instructor for clarification of vague instructions.
- While taking a test, feel comfortable, but remain alert. Wear comfortable clothes and choose a place to take the test that gives you plenty of room to work with the fewest distractions.
- “Do a mind dump. Using what you saw in the test preview, make notes of anything you think you might forget. Write down things that you used in learning the material that might help you remember” (Survival Strategies).

- Do not look for patterns in test answers. Instructors may try to trick test-takers by making what seems to be a pattern in responses when no pattern truly exists.
- If a question seems difficult, try circling the key words to help focus attention on the central point.
- Only make changes in a response when it is certain the original response is incorrect. Oftentimes the first response given is correct.
- Make sure to focus only on the exam while working. Do not be concerned about the pace that the other students in the classroom are working at or what is happening within the classroom. Also, do not waste time by worrying about what might happen if the exam is not passed.
- If you begin to feel anxious during an exam, try to calm yourself down by stretching, taking a few deep breaths, and using some positive self-talk. This will allow you to take your mind off of the exam for a few moments and regain the focus needed to be successful.
- Remember to expect only your personal best, especially if the exam is more difficult than anticipated.
- Mark any question for which you do not have an answer. Tell yourself that you have more than likely studied the material, but simply cannot recall it at that moment.
- Write as neatly as possible on the exam. While neatness does not necessarily add to your grade, most instructors greatly appreciate a neatly

written paper. This appreciation might lead to a better grade from the instructor.

- “If a test includes both essay and multiple-choice questions, fill out the multiple-choice part first. Answering multiple-choice questions will help you remember the material and make connections between concepts. Multiple-choice questions may also contain information that you can use to answer essay questions” (Boyd).
- When working through a test, if the first few questions on the first page are unknown, turn to the end of the test and work backwards. Typically instructors put the most recently taught material at the end of the test. This allows for the test-taker to answer questions that he feels more confident answering and build confidence for the rest of the exam.
- After finishing an examination, use the remaining time to check over all of the responses given. Be sure to check for accuracy as well as completion of all parts of the test.
- Do not go over the test questions with a friend after the exam is over. Focus on rewarding yourself for doing the best that you could do at that time.
- After the exam, celebrate a job well done. Going to a movie or getting a cup of coffee with a friend are two inexpensive ways to celebrate the end of an examination.

During a multiple-choice examination

- When struggling with a question, it is best to mark it and move on to the next question. Be sure to come back to the missed question before turning in the examination.
- When taking a standardized test, make sure that the answer sheet is filled in carefully. Many students answer standardized test questions correctly, but then fail to fill in the correct circle on the answer grid. If a question is skipped, make sure that there is a blank left on the answer grid for the answer to the skipped problem.
- Read the question stem with the intent of answering the question without looking at the choices. This will allow for the test-taker to feel more confident in his answers because he knew the correct answer and was less likely to be confused by the distracters on the examination.
- When an answer is not known, use the process of elimination to make a more educated guess.
- If numbers are involved in the alternatives, it is typically best to choose one that falls in the mid-range of the answers given. However, do not believe that this is a better test taking method than knowing the correct answer—it's not. This is a general tip for test-takers that become confused and cannot recall the correct answer.
- If one answer is longer and more descriptive than the others are, it is typically the correct answer.

- When there are two answers that appear very similar, one of those is probably the correct response. It is up to the test taker to determine which one is more accurate based on the small details that make the answers different.
- Be cautious of negative words used in any part of a multiple-choice question or instructions. If a negative word appears, take a moment to think about what the question is truly asking.
- Do not try to read more into a question than what the test-maker intended.

During a True/False examination

- The best way to prepare for a True/False examination is to spend the time learning the facts verbatim. However, be aware that the instructor will probably alter the wording slightly, so truly learning the material is a must.
- When you cannot remember whether a particular statement is true or not, assume it is true. Typically there are more true answers on this type of exam than false ones because emphasis is generally placed on true statements.
- When reading the statements, carefully look for anything that might make the statement false. Most instructors will simply add a false statement in an otherwise true sentence.
- Look for modifiers that seem extreme; they typically will make the statement false. Some of these modifiers are all, none, best, absolutely, always, never, worst, absolutely not, only, nobody, everybody, certainly, certainly not, invariably, no one, and everyone.

- Some modifiers tend to make statements true. Some of these modifiers are usually, frequently, often, sometimes, some, seldom, many, much, probably, a majority, apt to, most, might, a few, may, and unlikely.
- Be very cautious of how negative words effect the meaning of a statement. Double negatives actually mean that the statement is true.
- Typically questions that state any reasons are false.
- Do not try to read more into a question than what the test-maker intended.

During a matching examination

- Before beginning, look at both lists to see what the relationship is between lists.
- Work through one list looking for the answers in the other list. This allows thinking to become more organized while looking at several pieces of information.
- Before choosing an answer, look through the entire list to be certain that the best one was picked. Matching tests are likely to have several similar answers, which require some critical thinking before responding.
- Once a match has been made, cross off the item on the second list so that it is not accidentally used again.
- Do not make any guesses until all certain matches have been made. This allows for more correct answers to be given and less error to be made due to guessing.

During a sentence completion or fill-in-the-blank examination

- Make sure that the answer given is grammatically correct. Oftentimes instructors will give clues as to the proper response by putting 'a' or 'an' directly before the blank. If the blank is directly preceded by 'an,' then the test-taker knows that the answer must begin with a vowel.
- Look at the number and length of the blanks to see if the test maker gave any clues as to the number of words in the response or the length of the words. A longer blank typically means the word is longer.
- "Provide a descriptive answer when you can not think of the exact word or words. The instructor will often give you credit or partial credit when you demonstrate that you have studied the material and can give a credible answer, even when you have not given the exact words" (Test Taking Strategies).

During an essay examination

- If an examination consists of short answer responses, make sure that each response is at least 2-3 sentences long.
- If a test contains more than one essay question read through each question carefully. This often will provide valuable information for answering the questions by refreshing your memory about the material.
- "Underline key verbs in the question. Essay questions usually focus on one or more key verbs. Here are some key words that often appear on essay exams:

- compare—examine similarities and differences
- summarize—briefly give the major points
- discuss—examine or analyze in detail
- relate—emphasize connections and associations

Concentrate on these key verbs; they will give you clues to the type of information that your teacher wants in your essay” (Boyd).

- Always make an outline or graphic organizer to plan the essay before beginning. If unable to complete the essay in the time allotted, underline the points on the organizer that were not covered due to time and write a note to the instructor explaining the situation. Oftentimes an instructor will give partial credit for information contained in the outline although the essay is incomplete.
- It is typically good to rephrase part of the essay question at the beginning of the response. This allows for the instructor to see how the student interpreted the question, thus effecting the answer given.
- Make sure that handwriting on an essay examination is legible. When an instructor cannot read the response given, he cannot accurately grade the paper.
- It is imperative that proper grammar is used in an essay response.
- Be sure to include a well-constructed response using the principles of English composition. Include a brief introduction, a solid body, and a brief conclusion in each essay response given.

Final Thoughts

Test anxiety can be overcome with the necessary time and effort. Much time will be spent before the examination learning the material and engaging in positive self-talk. During the examination it is important to continue the positive self-talk and use the various test-taking strategies. If anxiety comes during an exam, take a restroom break or stretch to regain focus and remember that good test taking is a skill that can be learned. Using positive self-talk throughout the examination and focusing solely on the exam will aid the test-taker in achieving success. By working through the test-taking process, testing will become less stressful and a time to show what knowledge has really been learned.

"Taking a test doesn't have to be a dreadful experience. Practicing your test-taking skills will help you manage the anxiety that often accompanies tests. Good test-taking skills will not guarantee that you get an 'A' on every test, but they will ensure that your test score reflects what you really know" (Boyd).

"Learn from your tests! When tests are returned, go through them thoroughly and see if your plan [for test taking] worked. Look at each section to identify your fault patterns. Do not be a defeatist. Consider every test a practice session. Do you need to pay more attention to multiple choice facts? Talk with the instructors regarding essay questions and find out how to describe your ideas, provide examples or be clearer. Test taking is an art, one which needs refinement. One can not refine the art without practice and serious thought" (Test Taking Strategies).

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